

CREATIVE DESTRUCTION? FROM THE WELFARE STATE TO THE GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Abstract

The intellectual and political assaults on the welfare states of affluent societies are one half of a process of what Joseph Schumpeter calls "creative destruction." The other half is the social construction of the idea and reality of the global information society. In this essay, the reasoning applied to dismantle the welfare state is examined, with particular attention being paid to its implications for the role of the state as cultural patron and guarantor of rights of access to the means of communication. Also examined are ways in which dominant visions of the information society draw upon the same reasoning that is applied to dismantling the welfare state. Contrary to prevailing mythology, the main trajectory of the development of the global information society is not toward the establishment of a free market, but rather it is aimed at the articulation and enforcement of rights of property ownership on behalf of global media and telecommunication cartels. One response to these decades-long developments has been a movement for a new global constitutionalism aimed at the establishment of global social and cultural policies which would parallel the already well-developed efforts to constitutionalise global market principles. The essay reviews some of these efforts.

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The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from new consumers' goods, the new methods of production and transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates [...] the same process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.

Joseph Schumpeter (1942)

Introduction

This essay focuses on what can be understood to be complementary acts of destruction and creation. The dismantling and/or radical restructuring of institutions of the modern welfare state occurs within the same political-economic framework as the erection of the institutions of the global information society. The particular subject of "creative destruction" (or "displacement") that I'd like to discuss is certain conceptions about "rights" in the welfare state versus the information society, and how in some ways the differing conceptions about rights in the assaults on the welfare state, and the promotion of the information society, reflect continuity in terms of social relations in the midst of creative destruction.

The aspect of displacement with which I'm most concerned for this paper is how "rights talk," specifically in some strands of liberal and communitarian social and political discourse, can illustrate what I mean by "displacement." In the US, Clinton has distinguished himself as a Democrat who has out-distanced his two Republican predecessors—Reagan and Bush—in his efforts to dismantle the welfare state. The two most noteworthy pieces of legislation to be passed during the first four years of his administration were for welfare and telecommunications "reform." In one symbolic and substantive move, the "costs" of the old economy were set aside while in another the "benefits" of the new economy presumably were put into place. The welfare bill was the concrete attempt by Clinton to "end welfare as we know it," while the telecommunications bill aims to promote new levels of global dominance by the US-based "sunrise" industries of mass media and telecommunications as we enter the 21st century. This view is unique only in the fact that, unlike the pronouncements of pundits, it carries with it the force of law in the US, while similar views are being developed or are in force in other national policy frameworks, and in regional and global trade agreements.

In Europe, while we have seen a decline of individual national welfare states, we also have seen the proliferation of an official "post-national" European discourse about the information society that is heavily influenced by ideas about borderless media serving citizens of the European Union and strengthening European leadership in a global information society (Europe and the Global Information Society, 1994; European Commission, 1996). This has included efforts to implement new media policies at the EU level which are responsive to weakened ones at the national level. Clearly, there are very significant differences between the US and the EU in terms of the meanings attached to the ideas of the welfare state and the information society, and furthermore there are differences among the countries of the EU. In the US, the term "welfare" is much more of a stigma, with connotations of permissiveness and dependency. By contrast, in Europe the welfare state historically has been understood as the guarantor of a collective commitment to serving common needs and interests, although that has been changing now for the past several years as neo-liberal economic policy development has shown.

Welfare and Its Critics

With good reason, most political discourse about welfare goes towards such “bread and butter” matters as health insurance, social security, and programs aimed at subsidising families living below recognised poverty levels. To a lesser extent, the welfare-communication linkage underscores the notion that welfare policies sometimes can and do represent a collective value placed upon state support for what are understood to be basic pre-conditions for effective participation in social, political, and cultural life, and for the cultivation of civic competence more generally.

A recent proponent of such a view is Amy Gutmann (1987; 1988), who describes public educational institutions, which serve as means of ensuring minimal democratic access to political education, as welfare institutions. Similarly, Michael Walzer (1988) characterises such institutions as national arts and humanities endowments as welfare institutions because they aim to democratise access to public culture and communication in a way which, arguably, commercial institutions cannot or will not. Policies to support public service broadcasting and universal telephone service also sometimes are understood as welfare policies. Despite their having existed long before the modern welfare state, we also can see how public libraries fit the description of welfare services in that, unlike private libraries, they represent a commitment by the state towards democratic communication by, in essence, removing market-based constraints on access to knowledge.

As Adam Przeworski (1985) has argued, the achievements of modern welfare states ought not to be understood as irreversible. Not surprisingly, in our present era, the same reasoning which is applied to general assaults on welfare is being applied to assaults on the idea that the state should play an active role as cultural patron and guarantor of access to the means of communication.

In short, the dominant viewpoint on communication policy as social policy is that liberal rights, grounded upon the ideal of the autonomous individual (and, in the modern age, the “corporate legal person”), should supersede democratic rights. Indeed, the ascendant common sense is that if the economic costs of democracy exceed a certain level, a state’s power and legitimacy will erode individual freedom (*The Economist*, 20 September 1997). It is a familiar neoliberal chant, and certainly it wields tremendous power in liberal critiques of the welfare state, discussed below.

Perhaps the longest tradition of critique about the welfare state comes from western Marxism. For example, in 1900 Rosa Luxemburg (1970) expressed disillusionment with the limits of parliamentary struggles and she urged German socialists not to let the goal of “revolution” be lost in short-term preoccupations over social “reform,” constrained as the latter is by bourgeois terms of legitimation. The “debate over reformism” has been a persistent theme reflecting ambivalence and division within Left political discourse with regard to the wisdom of “working within the system.”

In more recent decades, a sophisticated Left discourse about the post-war welfare state has evolved. Of particular interest is the role social welfare policies play in stabilising the conditions for capital accumulation, and in legitimating capitalism in the eyes of those who otherwise might be disaffected to the point of threatening the stability of capital. Among the principal thinkers who have examined the logic of the welfare state and arrived at these conclusions are Jürgen Habermas (1975), Claus Offe (1984) and James O’Connor (1973, 1984). For these authors, a “crisis of legitimation” results from the state’s inability to make non-general interests be seen as having universal value.

For Offe and O'Connor in particular, the welfare state has played a uniquely important function in the history of capitalism because it has, to a certain limited degree, de-commodified labour within limits tolerable to forces of accumulation, thus reducing the degree to which workers are prey to the vagaries of the market for human labour. From the perspective of capital, an unwanted "side-effect" of this de-commodification is that the welfare state has opened up political space for the working class and the poor to effectively exercise democratic rights, even (and especially) against the interests of capital. Today, the dismantling of the welfare state can be understood from this perspective as an attempt, whether or not it is explicitly articulated as such, to re-commodify labour (through such means as de-skilling, union-busting, and strategic industrial location and re-location), with the effect of reversing many of what were once thought in the postwar era to be inalienable and irreversible social rights, achieved through previous decades of struggle.

While debates within the Left may have contributed in some small way to the welfare state's overall decline in ideological terms, there have been far more influential intellectual assaults, arising particularly from the liberal tradition, but also more recently from communitarianism and postmodernism. While these perspectives are in some ways incompatible, it can hardly be said that they are diametrically opposed. And while liberalism clearly provides the dominant meta-narrative against welfare, each plays a significant role in influencing both media policy and entrepreneurial activity in the media in ways that are antagonistic to a view of the state as cultural patron or as guarantor of access to the means of communication.

Liberalism: Classical and Modern

The term "liberalism" has unique political connotations in the United States that are inconsistent with those applied elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, there is the tradition of liberal political theory stemming back to Locke and Kant, emphasising the obligation of the state to protect private property and inheritance, and to protect the rights of individual citizens to pursue enlightenment through the public use of reason. Distant from those traditions, in the US the term "liberal" generally is used as a code-word for what is seen as an overly-indulgent political Left, exemplified during the 1988 presidential campaign when George Bush made a McCarthyist slur against Michael Dukakis, a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, by calling Dukakis a "card-carrying liberal." Interestingly, the policies advocated by the Democratic party which Dukakis represented have been more the target of disillusionment by the political Left than the more predictable positions the Left has found in Republican politics. Unlike the social democratic parties of Europe, where centre-Left coalitions have tended to be more common, the US Democratic party generally has been understood by the political Left in the US as centrist. In contrast with this understanding of "liberal," neo-liberalism's manifestation in modern politics can be found in the movement toward the "minimal state," which is characterised by the primacy lent to creating the structural conditions which best facilitate free enterprise and experimentation with new forms of market organisation. Neo-liberal thought has its more recent and influential foundations in the writings of Isaiah Berlin, F.A. Hayek, Joseph Schumpeter, and Robert Nozick.

Few would claim that there are no genuine needs which must be met in order for individuals to be able live in dignity as responsible citizens. However, liberal theorists hold fast to the position that an argument in favour of government taking responsibility for meeting such needs is an argument against liberty. In his famous essay on two

concepts of liberty, negative and positive, Isaiah Berlin (1969) defines “negative liberty” in terms of the absence of obstacles which may impede the pursuit of individual interests, whereas “positive liberty” is based on actively promoting the pursuit of collectively defined interests through government mechanisms. In the former (negative liberty), individuals are left to define and satisfy their own needs as they identify them, while in the latter (positive liberty), individuals are assumed to share basic needs in common and those who are unable to meet such needs themselves are assisted in doing so by state intervention. Berlin writes passionately in favour of the emancipatory force of “negative liberty” and against the what he considers to be the oppressiveness of “positive liberty,” which is not liberty at all in his view.

Similar to Berlin, Hayek (1960) opposes preoccupations with “social justice” as being borne of envy, ultimately enfeebling, and as robbing welfare clients of incentive to succeed and depriving them of the ability to develop strength of character. Furthermore, they oppose the welfare state because in their view it violates claims to private property by way of taxation and re-distributive mechanisms which deprive individuals of their hard-earned money. While it is an appeal to individual rather than collective interests, it generally is coupled with the argument that government re-distributive mechanisms dampen incentives among those in society who are best able to strengthen the economy and thus improve society. Finally, liberals oppose national protections of economic enterprises, at least in theory, and thus they tend to favour transnational trade agreements and economic globalisation.

Neo-liberal thought has been profoundly influential not only in the current dismantling of what is seen by some as the overweening welfare states of Europe (and, to a lesser extent, the United States), but also in advocating and later explaining the unravelling of the Soviet empire. Sometimes the neo-liberal celebrations of these developments are labelled “triumphalism,” and they are well-illustrated in the writing of Francis Fukuyama and numerous others. This discourse has been deployed extensively in justifying many recent developments in US and European telecommunications and mass media policies, and in assessing these industries’ impacts on the establishment of new terms of global commerce and culture.

Since the late 1970s, global trends in de-regulation, privatisation, and market liberalisation; the assaults on Western welfare states; the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the establishment of transnational trade regimes at the regional and global levels, are all viewed as symptoms of the ascendancy of global capitalism as the dominant form of economic organisation, with economic liberalism as the dominant, but not unchallenged, political meta-narrative on the eve of the 21st century. It bears mentioning that global media and telecommunications conglomerates are among the chief orchestrators and beneficiaries of the emergence of this regime.

The Communitarian Moment

Communitarianism is a wide-ranging contemporary movement which distinguishes itself from liberalism, sometimes quite explicitly, by opposing the individualism, materialism, and greed which is seen to be underlying the liberal economic agenda. A return to spirituality, to family, and to a sense of communal obligation are characteristic themes advocated by intellectuals commonly associated with communitarianism. Among the most visible speakers on behalf of communitarian ideals are Amitai Etzioni, Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, Michael Sandel, and Mary Ann Glendon. Among the intellectual legacies most often cited by these authors is that of Alexis de Tocqueville,

who argued that what made democracy in America work was competent citizenship, cultivated through commitment and direct involvement in community affairs. The critique of the welfare state by communitarians, and visions of alternatives, bear directly on the compellingly persuasive political language of “empowerment,” “virtue,” “obligation” and “community” which are used widely by communitarians.

Communitarianism has been highly influential in both of the major political parties in the US, with the current president being particularly attracted to some of its core propositions. The communitarian movement resonates with the popular and influential writings of William Bennett, a self-styled expert on the subject of virtue who has managed to distinguish himself from the neo-liberal positions of his own Republican party and become a moral compass for leading members of the Clinton administration, including the president himself. At the heart of modern communitarian positions on the welfare state is the sense of the loss of virtue and communal obligation, due to its displacement by a sense of entitlement and consequent over-dependency on government. In many ways, the communitarian movement represents a dissatisfaction with what Daniel Bell (1976) has referred to as “the cultural contradictions of capitalism.” An economic agenda pushes us in one direction, and moral imperatives push us in another. Moral controversies about sex on television provide useful illustrations of such contradictions. Those who are absolutist in defending free enterprise, but who consider televised sex to be morally objectionable, find themselves locked in a paradox where their economic priorities are in conflict with their moral judgement.

In some ways, modern communitarianism is seen to be an off-shoot of the tradition of civic republicanism, particularly with respect to their similar attachment to the idea of virtue as the essential normative element of good citizenship and a good society. In attempting to reconcile key aspects of modern communitarianism with civic republican thought, and to provide the basis of his critique of liberalism, Michael Sandel (1996) appeals to the idea of civic virtue. However, there is disagreement about whether there is an identity between communitarianism and civic republicanism. For instance, Habermas argues that communitarians over-burden the proceduralist orientation of civic republicanism with an “ethical constriction of political discourse,” making the republican model too idealistic to be workable according to its historical terms (1994, 4). Communitarian thought stands firm on the position that a commitment to a prior unified conception of **moral** virtue is necessary in a good society, whereas in civic republicanism no such guarantee is sought.¹ The differing concepts of virtue in communitarianism and classical republicanism point to more general unresolved differences between the two modes of thought with respect to concepts of a good society.

Another less visible manifestation of this sort of contradiction is illustrated by the widespread dissatisfaction regarding the role the media play in creating and sustaining political community. The fusing of news and entertainment into what has become known as “infotainment” has become a matter that is deeply disturbing to those who argue that the media have an ethical responsibility to elevate rather than degrade the quality of critical public discourse. In response to this viewpoint, a “civic journalism” movement in the newspaper industries has emerged which attempts to make local papers play more of a leadership role in the fostering of constructive political debate over issues which concern a community. The idea behind this movement is for local media to spin more of a web of ties that bind a community together around common and important needs and interests. Similar aspirations are held towards “media access” and “community networks” in the realm of cable television and the Internet.

Whether these locally oriented initiatives manage to address the large-scale political and economic constraints upon their efforts, as some thoughtful critics have suggested, is an open question. Indeed, the localist orientation of much of communitarian theory and practice calls into question its power as a political movement. At the same time, despite the many differences between liberals and communitarians, communitarian calls for a moratorium on rights claims, as well as for a heightened sense of communal obligation, have resonated very well with the liberal political agenda to roll back the welfare state. Ironically, communitarians are much less concerned about achieving a moratorium on rights claims by global corporations in areas of transnational trade, investment, and intellectual property.

Post-Marxism and Post-Modernism

The term "postmodern" probably is over-used, particularly in academic settings, although there are some core preoccupations in postmodern thought which carry substantial weight in the collective arguments against the welfare state. Given postmodernism's preoccupations with the symbolic world and with the means by which meaning is created, thinkers in this vein have had a good deal to say in regard to the media industries. The concepts which "postmodernists" are probing are not limited to the realm of aesthetics, as some writers suggest. The literature on postmodern political thought tends to reflect a disillusionment with struggles for a universal public sphere, and sees this effort as a legacy of the inherent contradictions and failures of the Enlightenment tradition. Much of this literature is informed by and arises in critical response to the intellectual traditions of "western Marxism." Key theorists in this vein are Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Zygmunt Bauman, and Chantal Mouffe. Among their concerns is what they tend to characterise as a failure of the traditional Left to break out of the mind-set of dictating authentic human needs and the means of satisfying them. To dictate which needs are legitimate, and the means to their satisfaction, is understood in postmodern theory as a denial of social and cultural differences for the sake of the Procrustean quest for elusive universal concepts of human nature and political community.

Some of the more trenchant critiques of postmodern thought, such as those by Frederic Jameson (1991) and David Harvey (1989), have viewed postmodernism not in emancipatory terms as a fundamental break from repressive cultural evolution in capitalist society, but rather, to use Jameson's words, as a reflection of "the cultural logic of late capitalism." Indeed, from this perspective it has been argued that postmodernism should be understood as having provided a powerful means for the cultural legitimization of new accumulation imperatives (such as the commodification of "diversity"), but not without contradictions which, as Jameson, Harvey and others acknowledge, potentially open up new means of political and cultural expression, subversion and resistance.

From within the field of media studies, the list of postmodern theorists includes those writers who are preoccupied with defining "the political" in particular ways to include the derivation of meaning from the practices of media consumption. Furthermore, some among them tend to reject "rationalist" or instrumental interpretations and treatment of the media along economic and policy lines, and in terms of the social impact of the media. For instance, it is argued that the emphasis on what every citizen needs to know ignores or underestimates the importance of what it is that people desire to experience when they consume cultural commodities. Furthermore, it is ar-

gued, “rationalist” explanations fail to allow for the possibility that alternative readings and uses of media will result in experiences which are individually and collectively liberating in a political sense, rather than being repressive.

A New Rights Revolution? The Rise of a Global Information Society

*By providing efficient, integrated global data connections, telecommunication companies now offer voters the ultimate shopping experience: shopping for better government. [...] In the past you had to vote with your feet. Now you can vote with your modem, too. The Web supplies an instant global storefront. [...] With cyber power all physical distances are roughly the same. And with this kind of global production system in place, a manufacturing company can move jobs and capital around like pieces on a chessboard, **shopping continually for the best-priced labor — and the best labor laws.** [...] All of this should be very reassuring. Most of us won't leave the country, not in person and not by wire. We won't have to. Competition improves the quality of everything else; it will improve the quality of government, too (Peter Huber 1996; emphasis added).*

*But the **Idols of the Market-place** are the most troublesome of all: idols which have crept into the understanding through the alliances of words and names. For men believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding; and this it is that has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophisticated and inactive. Now words, being commonly framed and applied according to the capacity of the vulgar, follow those lines of division which are most obvious to the vulgar understanding (Francis Bacon 1620/1994).*

The value in examining the discourse about the information society is not to predict the future, or to marvel or lament over its prospects. Of course it would be valuable to know what the future holds, but cybernetic fantasies—the stuff of Alvin Toffler, George Gilder, and Newt Gingrich—are not in short supply, and I do not aim to add to the glut. But it would be a mistake to assume that the information society is simply a subject of fantasy among the most outspoken technological zealots, since this discourse preoccupies investors of large sums of capital, and the attention of many heads of state. For example, in his remarks at the signing ceremony for the 1996 telecommunications legislation, U.S. president Clinton announced:

This historic legislation in my way of thinking really embodies what we ought to be about as a country and what we ought to be about in this city [Washington, DC]. It clearly enables the age of possibility in America to expand to include more Americans. It will create many, many high-wage jobs. It will provide for more information and more entertainment to virtually every American home. [...] Today our world is being remade yet again by an information revolution, changing the way we work, the way we live, the way we relate to each other. Already the revolution is so profound that it is changing the dominant economic model of the age (Clinton 1996).

Like other pundits, Clinton simultaneously aggravates and soothes new anxieties and desires for security, affluence and status in a world made uncertain by a “revolu-

tion [...] so profound" that we appear to be left with no choice but to place our unqualified faith in his particular vision of what the new "model of the age" should be and **embrace** it. Implied by the tone of his words is the idea that there could **be** no other path forward than the one he has chosen.

To understand the political evolution of the information society, it is helpful to look back on the evolution of rights discourse in liberal states. Writing about the relationship between social class and citizenship in the 20th century, T. H. Marshall (1950) outlines the history of rights development in European welfare states. Marshall explains the evolution of rights in three stages, beginning with the normalisation of the Lockean conception of "civil rights" in the 18th century. The tensions between the idea of civil society and the imperatives of the marketplace can be traced to early modern political thought.² The next "revolution" in rights, according to Marshall, was the expansion of the right to participate in political power, established widely as a principle of the modern nation state by the end of the 19th century, and manifested first by universal male suffrage and later by the extension of suffrage to women. No longer was property ownership, or membership in the bourgeoisie, a pre-condition for "democratic participation." A third revolution in rights came in the 20th century, according to Marshall, and it emerged in full force in the post-WWII era with the establishment of European welfare states. While the late 1930s New Deal legacy of US president Franklin D. Roosevelt certainly served as a model for many of the postwar social policies implemented in Europe, the relatively more expansive policies in some European countries bring them closer to an ideal-typical manifestation of "the welfare state" (Ehrenreich, 1985). Nevertheless, while free market rhetoric and realities are more firmly embedded in American populist thought, few political theorists would claim that the United States is not, to some extent, a welfare state.

In the remainder of this section, I aim to demonstrate how the discourse about the information society is dominated by the global ascendance of quasi-religious beliefs about socially constructed property rights as "natural rights," and about the belief in "free trade" as the primary social activity from which all other social goods are derived. In particular, I will argue that today we are witnessing a fourth "rights revolution" (following T. H. Marshall) in the midst of multi-directional assaults on the welfare state and the concurrent struggle to define the meaning of the information society.

The most unique feature of the current rights revolution, in comparison with those analysed by Marshall, is the fact that the historically important gains he describes all are exercised within the context of the nation state, with the state as guarantor of those rights. In contrast, the current emergence of a rights regime involves the state not as guarantor, but rather as representative and negotiator, venture capitalist and corporate lawyer, in a context beyond the boundaries of the state's territorial and political sovereignty. Arguably, this condition radically legitimates a rise in unaccountable power on a global scale. The degree of transnational government co-operation in the contemporary construction and enforcement of a global property rights regime is unprecedented. It poses a major innovation in commerce while simultaneously threatening traditional concepts of sovereignty and citizenship.

As any advocate for global "free trade" recognises, what is required is not the elimination of regulation **per se**, but rather the marshalling of state power to strengthen and legitimate a regime to articulate and enforce the conditions of global commerce and culture. In other words, new constitutions must be put into place at the transnational level (regionally and globally) in order to ensure that the prospects for

capital accumulation are optimised beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. This process is already well underway, the testimony to which are the many regional trading blocs and the results of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the latter having resulted in the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The Uruguay Round rightly can be understood as a global constituent assembly, the purpose of which was to articulate more clearly and firmly than ever before the rights of capital accumulation and private property ownership beyond the boundaries of the state, and to delegate authority to an enforcement body (the WTO). More recently, the development of a Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI), scheduled to be ratified by many states in 1998, threatens to usurp a significant degree of political and economic sovereignty from states, and pose the greatest threat to the political sovereignty of poorer countries. The enforcement body for the MAI will be the WTO.

These profound historic developments clearly indicate what kind of global information society has been envisioned collectively by the wealthiest and most powerful owners of the means of communication and global production. The GATT and the MAI represent monumental movements towards the commodification and re-commodification of culture and labour on a world-scale, and they produce and legitimate a global system of unaccountable private power.

Examining the rules of the WTO does not provide us with a clear enough understanding of its underlying rationale for an information society rights revolution. For that, we can examine futuristic prognostications and prescriptions of the more influential prophets of the information society. One document of this sort which deserves particular attention is the "Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age," co-authored by Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler (1994). While perhaps not as binding in a legal sense as the GATT (and, eventually, the MAI), the "Magna Carta" gives a more direct sense of the ideological underpinnings of a global policy regime for trade, investment, and property development, and of the idea and reality of the global information society.

The "Magna Carta" is a self-consciously framed "constitution" of sorts, complete with a "preamble," an outline of the role of government in a global information society, and a list of what are considered to be the critical rights which warrant protection. While reference is made throughout to "American" society, it is clear that the authors see their canvas as being global. Regarding the technologies of the information society, they appeal to the libertarian rhetoric of unleashing the "fast-growing telecommunications and computing industries." Most important for the purposes of the present analysis is the strong emphasis on **property rights**:

Defining property rights in cyberspace is perhaps the single most urgent and important task for government information policy. Doing so will be a complex task, and each key area — the electromagnetic spectrum, intellectual property, cyberspace itself (including the right to privacy) — involves unique challenges. The important points here are:

First, this is a "central" task of government. A Third Wave government will understand the importance and urgency of this undertaking and begin seriously to address it; to fail to do so is to perpetuate the politics and policy of the Second Wave.

Secondly, the key principle of ownership by the people — private ownership — should govern every deliberation. Government does not own cyberspace, the people do.

Thirdly, clarity is essential. Ambiguous property rights are an invitation to litigation, channelling energy into courtrooms that serve no customers and create no wealth. From patent and copyright systems for software, to challenges over the ownership and use of spectrum, the present system is failing in this simple regard (Dyson et al. 1994).

Today, with the pursuit of a capital-intensive global information society through the mechanisms of regional and global trade and investment agreements, combined with the rollback of democratic welfare states in the North and the imposition in the South of strict "structural adjustment policies," efforts are in full swing to ensure that in the near future there will be no adequately enforced global constitutional principles for democracy to parallel the agreements which have been successfully implemented in the past few years to promote the consolidation of political and economic power by global cartels.

In essence, a neo-liberal agenda for an exclusively market-driven global information society, and radically weakened national priorities towards democratic social policies in the North and South, mark a regressive moment in the evolution of democratic principles and human rights. But they do so not by denying the importance of the "citizen" *per se*. The current wave of efforts to step up the development of enforcement mechanisms for transnational trade, investment, and property regimes is evidence of the primacy given to what T. H. Marshall described as "civil rights." These new regimes do much to establish and protect a particular manifestation of "global citizenship," that is, for the wealthiest members of global society. In the 18th century, civil rights were guaranteed to individual property holders, not to large, limited-liability corporations which manage to achieve the privileged status of an individual in terms of legal rights. While the guarantee of civil rights was rightly seen as progressive at a time when the European bourgeoisie was struggling for political power and attempting to displace a feudal order, the pursuit of such rights today on a new, transnational political stage, at the neglect of the "political" and "social" rights described by Marshall, marks a backward step in social policy.

Communication and the Politics of a Global Civil Society

The global mobilisation of commerce, information and culture is now widely recognised as an accelerating trend, and the technologies and institutions of communication are rightly recognised as fundamental to those processes. Among the many questions raised by such processes is one shared increasingly across the social sciences about the need for an understanding of "society" which is not defined by the boundaries of the nation-state, but instead one which recognises the permeability and limited political sovereignty and cultural autonomy of the nation state. Contemporary social movements related to human rights, the environment, and other subjects of universal importance demonstrate how communications media are used increasingly to respond to, and circumvent at times, the political limits of the nation-state.

Social Movements and the Making of Political Space

What, then, of the political status of space? No sooner has space assumed a political character than its depoliticization appears on the agenda (Henri Lefebvre 1991, 416).

Today, contemporary political and economic crises are evident in the decreasing ability of mass political parties and unions to define social identities. Supplanting these old identities are those based on “post-materialist” values, including peace, ecological, and women’s movements which cut across old class divisions. The type of collective political action characteristic of these movements tends toward being extra- and, to a certain extent, anti-institutional in comparison with the stress on labour unions and political parties. According to Claus Offe (1984), “the channels of party politics are fundamentally inappropriate forms of organisation” for new social movements (p. 172). While the logic of political parties is to maximise votes “in order to occupy positions of state power and to conduct the entire business of government” (p. 172), social movements based on “post-materialist” values focus on a single issue or set of issues and not a broad multi-interest platform of consensus. Rejecting institutionally established boundaries of what defines “the political,” the actors of the “new politics” thus favour “political action within civil society” (Offe, 1987, p. 72), the wisdom of which is reflected in the feminist phrase born in the 1970s, “the personal is political.”

A key characteristic associated with these movements is that they do not seek institutionalisation while at the same time they seek to have a radical impact on the transformation of political, economic, and cultural institutions. While maintaining that social movements can never “exhaust themselves in representation,” Melucci (1985) acknowledges that “social movements can’t survive in complex societies without some forms of political representation” (p. 815). Nevertheless, he argues that the goal of a “new political space” between state and civil society should be to simultaneously enable movements to maintain their autonomy without institutionalising themselves (for instance, into unions and political parties) while making society “hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making.” This “enlargement of the public space” is, for Melucci, “the task for a real ‘postindustrial’ democracy” (pp. 815-816).

Indeed, new social movements may succeed more fully in national politics insofar as they manage to bring international pressure to bear upon the state. Melucci (1985, 813) notes, for example, that peace mobilisations have “fundamental transnational effects”. One can also see this with ecology mobilisations as a growing number of transnational corporations deploy ecologically devastating operations in Third World countries while such activities are banned or severely limited in the countries in which those corporations are headquartered. While it is questioned whether these movements sufficiently problematise contemporary manifestations of class inequity, social movement theories nevertheless are generally socialist in their interpretive and normative approaches to public life.

Among the principal weaknesses of these perspectives on social movements is that they have mostly tended to ignore the class basis of “social movements in the periphery.” *Transforming the Revolution*, by Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein (1990), is a significant response to the prevailing assumption that the post-Cold War, post-Uruguay Round global intellectual and political climate is one which will enhance the spread of democracy. Also, these authors place a much stronger emphasis on the global nature of relations of exploitation, inequality, and peripheralisation, and they present a strong case that effective responses cannot be limited to national politics. At the same time, the authors reject the politically expedient and simplistic conclusion that the re-negotiation of state power in the world capitalist system is evidence of the irrelevance of state structures.

The "Limits to the State"?

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States (Antonio Gramsci 1971, 52).

Gramsci's view on the effective exercise of power by subaltern groups maintains that the seizure of state power be an eventual goal. Like most political theorists before and since his time, the idea of political struggle was not conceived with any other aim than the taking of state power, whereas today the "new social movements" are understood by a variety of critics as lacking such a purpose (Frankel 1983). Michael Walzer interprets such an outlook as "a willingness to settle for something less than total victory," but he warns that the danger lies in the potential to regress into "anti-politics," a condition in which the state is alienated from civil society (1991, 301). As Boris Frankel argues in his critique of the "post-materialist" orientation towards social movements, "No social movement can hope to implement policies on unilateral nuclear disarmament, equal wages for women, stringent environmental controls and other eco-socialist policies, without organizations which affect state power" (1987, 267).

The paradox of the state-civil society relationship, according to Walzer, is that the state sets the boundaries and pre-conditions for other forms of association. Thus, he argues, it is imperative that we struggle for democratic states in order to maximise the potential for a democratic civil society, "[f]or civil society, left to itself, generates radically unequal power relationships, which only state power can challenge" (1991, 302). Certainly that is a foremost concern among those who rightly view with fear the consolidation of unaccountable private power on a global stage, and the abnegation of responsibility by powerful governments involved in orchestrating "free trade" policies.

The tension over the relationship between social movements and the modern state is deeply troubling for many social and political theorists. Writing about the relevance of Hannah Arendt's views on politics for an understanding of "new social movements," Richard Bernstein writes with ambivalence that it is a mistake to limit our understanding of the political to what is institutionally legitimated by the instruments of the state. On the other hand, he writes "There is a danger of becoming sentimental about new social movements, of failing to realize how many of them not only aspire to create public spaces where freedom becomes concrete, but also seek to put an end to what Arendt takes to be politics" (1986, 257). In this latter view, we can see the essence of what has come to be known as "identity politics," which according to the view of many is no politics at all.

An implication of Bernstein's analysis is that the de-territorialised dimension of contemporary social movements leads to the risk of their failure in political terms. While it may be a mistake for grassroots movements to limit their aspirations to seizing or significantly impacting state power alone and ignore transnational trends at their peril, this does not necessarily undermine the validity of efforts to develop constitutional principles for a democratic global civil society.

It is not for the lack of sound, intelligent efforts to articulate the necessary conditions for extending the franchise of "global citizenship" beyond interests of a global elite that more progressive social policy ideas have not come to the fore of global policy

making. For example, writing about the impact of neo-liberal policies on the periphery, Samir Amin argues against “unifying the world system by the unilateral basis of the market” (1997, 22). Like others who can see clearly that the “limits of the state” push us towards trans-state solutions to social ills, he advocates the pursuit of a constitutional trajectory to develop a democratic agenda for global social and cultural policies which would parallel the already well-developed efforts to constitutionalise global market principles:

As far as action to be taken at the level of international organization of general interdependence is concerned, this strategy aims at encouraging the development, in an embryonic form, of a “democratic world government” (as opposed to domination by the Group of 7) as illustrated by the introduction of a world tax earmarked for ecological operations, for instance. In addition, it proposes to reduce the tensions that have arisen due to the massive stocking of weapons, notably by the superpowers. Finally, its ambition is to give a new lease on life to the democratic institutionalizing of world control by reviving interest in the United Nations (Amin 1997, 23).

Similarly, David Held calls for a new “Bretton Woods” agreement — “an agreement which would tie investment, production and trade to the conditions and processes of democracy” (1995, 256).

The irony of Amin’s and Held’s prescriptions is that a call for a more global constitutionalism, which recognises the central importance of the means of communication in establishing notions of democratic “global citizenship,” was well underway many years before the Uruguay Round, the G7, and various regional trading blocs put the idea of the information society on their agendas. One of the many ways in which the importance of the role of communications media in sustaining contemporary movements has been recognised is through the legacy of the famed **ad hoc** International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, which was assigned in the late 1970s by UNESCO to write a report regarding world communication issues. The legacy of the Commission is often associated with the name of the man who presided over it, the late Nobel laureate Sean MacBride. The continued significance of Commission’s study, often called simply “The MacBride Report,” is highlighted below.

The MacBride Legacy

The MacBride Report to UNESCO, and the call for a “new world information and communication order” (NWICO) which followed, precipitated the decision by the United States government to withdraw its membership from UNESCO. In a December 1983 letter from Reagan-administration Secretary of State George Schultz to UNESCO Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, the reasons for the U.S. withdrawal were given. While equal emphasis was given to issues of mismanagement, and “the injection of political goals beyond the scope of the cooperative enterprise,” what was clear throughout was that the decision was made on behalf of big mass media and telecommunications industry interests in the U.S. Stating that the U.S. government, “along with the American people generally,” believe in UNESCO’s constitution, Schultz noted that “We plan to use the resources we presently devote to UNESCO to support such other means of cooperation” (1984).³ Schultz may not have anticipated the exact ways in which “other means of cooperation” would be sought, but the development of a U.S. foreign policy in mass media and telecommunications since

that time indicates that trade and investment have been highest on the agenda (Calabrese and Redal 1997).

Despite the symbolic and economic blow dealt to UNESCO by the U.S. withdrawal, efforts to pursue many of the ideals described in the MacBride Report have continued. In 1989, the first "MacBride Roundtable" met in Harare, Zimbabwe "to assess the state of global communication ten years after the publication of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems" (Harare Statement 1992). Since that time, there have been a total of eight other roundtables, in Prague (1990), Istanbul (1991), Sao Paulo (1992), Dublin (1993), Honolulu (1994), Tunis (1995), Seoul (1996), and Boulder, Colorado (1997).⁴

Each meeting of the Roundtable has attempted to articulate a range of issues and positions regarding what have been seen as the necessary conditions for the use of media and communication for purposes of democratisation and empowerment. Since the time of the original MacBride Report, there has been a shift in emphasis away from a preoccupation with the institutionalisation of a global social and cultural policy regime in communication, and towards grassroots efforts and non-governmental action. Mowlana and Roach note the progressive shift within the NWICO movement from a heavy emphasis on national and international governmental organisations at the initial phase (particularly evident in the initial "MacBride Report"), towards the ongoing emphasis on non-governmental and professional organisations (1992, 7). For example, in the Second MacBride Roundtable, held in Prague in September 1990, there was no governmental participation, "which reinforced the efforts of some NWICO backers to steer the movement in a 'grassroots' 'people's' direction" (Mowlana and Roach, 1992, 11).

This is not to say that grassroots efforts and non-governmental organisations were neglected at the start. On the contrary, recommendations in the original MacBride Report explicitly included a focus on the grassroots, on women, children, ethnic and religious minorities, movements for peace and disarmament, and human rights. Nevertheless, the main publicity and controversy over the MacBride Report centred around its implications for the potential establishment of a set of national and global governmental **policies**, which would threaten U.S. cultural, technological and economic hegemony in the media and communication industries. Rather than continue to support the existence of an organisation (UNESCO) which threatened the future growth and global dominance of some of the most lucrative and successful exporting industries of the U.S., the instrumentally rational choice was made by the U.S. government to support its domestic industries by withdrawing and pursuing "other means of cooperation."

Colleen Roach (1997) relates the discourses on the NWICO and that of the global information society by taking note that the hegemonic thinking about the latter clarifies the foundations from which the efforts to destroy the former have arisen. Indeed, as she points out, Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny, UN Under-Secretary-General for Information in 1990, clearly articulated this (anti-NWICO) position:

Over many years, the international debate on information and communication did not result in agreement on a common approach. I wish only to refer to some of the discussions, for instance, on concepts of a new world information order, which in the eyes of many actors in the field of communication have harmed international efforts to construct a world-wide information society (Paquet-Sévigny, quoted in Roach 1997, 116).

Despite its quasi-governmental status, UNESCO is hardly a powerful institution in global policy making. However, by virtue of its broad intellectual mission and its connection to the United Nations, it does have some significance in terms of the moral authority and legitimating force it can wield, which the U.S. government implicitly recognised at the time of its decision to withdraw. To reclaim its influence, UNESCO seems to have moved to a more **status quo**, pro-WTO ideological framework as far as the idea of the information society is concerned. Thus, it is important to distinguish the NWICO/MacBride “movement,” which gained its initial momentum from UNESCO sponsorship, from the current prevailing positions in UNESCO leadership regarding the idea of a global information society.

Conclusion

The intellectual and political assaults on the welfare states of affluent societies are one half of a process of what Joseph Schumpeter calls “creative destruction.” The other half is the social construction of the idea and reality of the global information society. In this essay, I highlighted efforts to reduce the role of the state as cultural patron and guarantor of rights of access to the means of communication, and I examined ways in which dominant visions of the information society draw upon the same reasoning that is applied to dismantling the welfare state. Contrary to prevailing mythology, the main trajectory of the development of the global information society is not toward the establishment of a free market, but rather it is aimed at the articulation and enforcement of rights of property ownership on behalf of global media and telecommunication cartels.

One response to these decades-long developments has been a movement for a new global constitutionalism aimed at the establishment of global social and cultural policies which would parallel the already well-developed efforts to constitutionalise global market principles. The essay reviews some of these efforts, particularly the legacy of the MacBride Report. It would be inaccurate to suggest that the MacBride legacy has come to an end, but it is true that the effort to develop a progressive global cultural agenda poses little threat to the “trade and investment” orientation of global policy making in media and communication. It is merely one element of a broad-based discourse about the alternatives to a global information society ruled by unaccountable private mega-cartels, and about the need to articulate and communication rights as foundations for a democratic culture and society. The long-term stability of the newly emerging global market system is unclear. Nevertheless, in this context, it is entirely possible, if not probable, that issues of the democratic control over and uses of modern means of communication will become a more central concern to the re-emergence of social and political movements world-wide in the coming years. Certainly it is a discussion kept alive in some fora, such as the MacBride roundtables on democratic communication, and through the “cultural environment movement,” with which it is associated.

Notes:

1. For example, the concept of *virtù* discussed in the writings of Machiavelli, who generally is seen as the “modern” republican thinker *par excellence*, carries with it the connotations of a stoic notion of strength of character — courage, ability, intelligence, even ruthlessness when deemed necessary — aimed toward achieving both a secure state and a citizenry committed to the common good. However, questions of justice, fairness, and suffering are not only irrelevant to Niccolò Machiavelli’s

concept of virtue, but rather it is a weak ruler who is preoccupied with them (Machiavelli 1961; Machiavelli 1970). See also Skinner (1970) and Pocock (1975).

2. In 1690, John Locke argued that the fundamental organizing principle of government should be the protection of private property in civil society, understood primarily in terms of the ownership of land and capital: "The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting" (Locke 1690/1924, 180).

3. The best, most detailed historical explanations of the MacBride Report and its aftermath in the "NWICO debates," particularly with respect to the U.S. position, have been produced by Colleen Roach (e.g., Roach 1987; 1991; 1997; and Mowlana and Roach 1992).

4. Further information about the MacBride Roundtables can be retrieved from the MBRT website at: <http://tdg.uoguelph.ca/~drichard/macbride>

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